Illinois Boys Reformatory School

Pontiac, Illinois

By: Dale C. Maley

December 11, 2025

Timeline

1871-Jason Strevell State Senator. Illinois Boys Reformatory School
Ages 8-16

1892 (name change)
Illinois State Reformatory
Ages 8-21

1904
Illinois State Reformatory
Ages 16-21.
St. Charles
Ages 8-15

1933
Pontiac Branch of Illinois State Penitentiary
Ages 18+

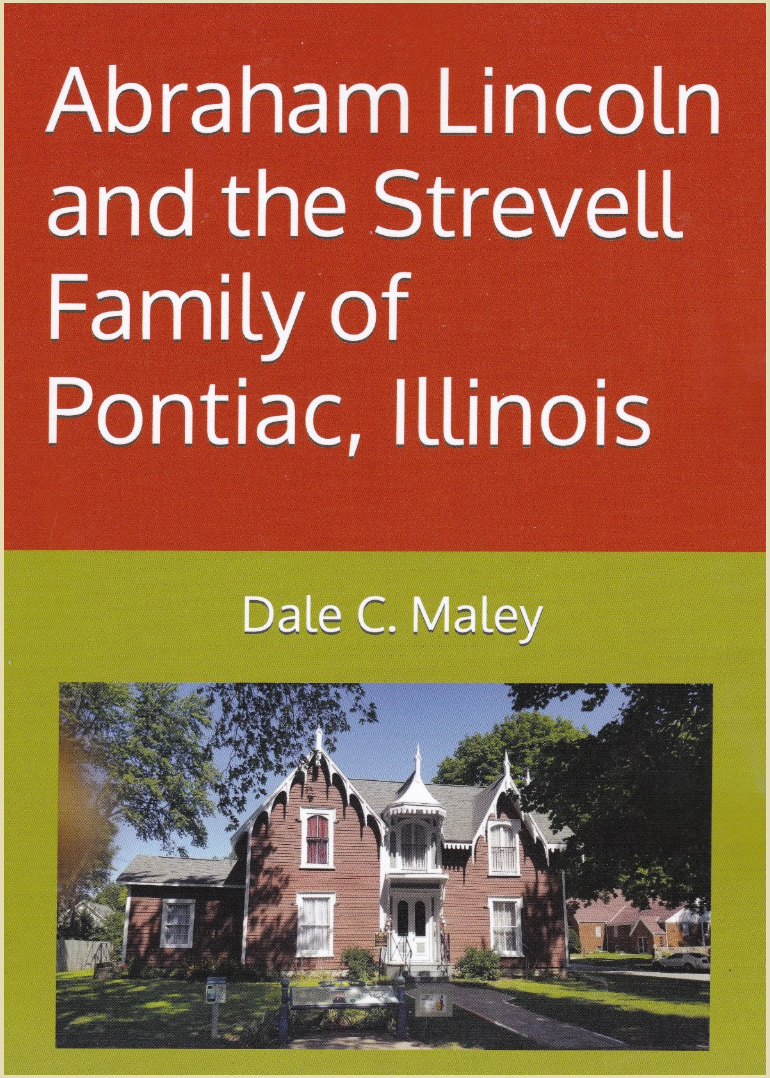
Bi-Annual Books

Googerty Years 1894-1934

1870 1890 1900 1920 1940

Boys Reformatory

- Jason Strevell Illinois State Senator
- Gets bill passed in 1871 to build new Boys Reformatory in Pontiac
- Strevell House at 401 W. Livingston one of 3 historic homes managed by the Historical Society



Boys Reformatory

In June of 1871, the first six young men, convicted of stealing horses in Peoria, arrived at the Illinois Boys Reformatory School in Pontiac.

Boys Reformatory

THEORY

- Educate young criminals
- Teach them a Trade
- They will get a job, become productive citizens and not return to the prison system.

Boys Reformatory

1. Granite tombstone manufacturing
2. Barbering
3. Textile manufacturing
4. Printing
5. Carpentry
6. Blacksmithing
7. Pipe fitting
8. Bricklaying
9. Laundry work
10. Engine work
11. Electrical work
12. Military drills
13. Farming

As many as 25 Trades

Boys Reformatory

1894

- The reformatory averaged 2,132 inmates.
- The youngest boys were ten years of age.
- Most of the boys were between the ages of 16 and 20.
- In 1894, 79% of the inmates were in the 16 to 20 age group.
- That year, 1,160 inmates were white, and 210 were non-white boys.

Boys Reformatory

1894

- The boys sent to the reformatory were convicted of many crimes.
- In 1894, the boys committed 53 different types of crimes.
- 76% of these crimes were theft-related.
- In 1894, twenty-six boys escaped from the reformatory.
- Twelve boys were captured, and three voluntarily returned to the facility. (11 were never caught)

Boys Reformatory

1894

•The 1894 inmate data indicated most boys came from broken homes

•and their parents were of lower incomes and poorly educated.

•In 1894, 45 percent of the boys came from Cook County.

•In 1894, 31% of Illinois residents lived in Cook County

Boys Reformatory

How Successful was the Theory of Educating and Teaching a Trade to Young Boy?

•In 1894, 86% of the boys left the reformatory and did not return because they had committed additional crimes.

•In 1904, management noted that over 5,000 boys had gone through the reformatory, and over 70% had become productive citizens.

Boys Reformatory

- In the early 1900s, several people and companies abused adult male prison labor in Illinois.

- Prison managers received kickbacks from companies for allowing these companies to use low-cost prison labor.

- Trade unions also complained the prisoners were taking jobs away from union members.

- As a result, new convict labor laws were passed in Illinois.

Boys Reformatory

- Although there was no labor abuse at the Pontiac reformatory, it fell under the same new laws as the adult prisons.

- At the reformatory, managers had to restrict or eliminate the teaching of specific trades covered by the new law.

Printing trade not covered by new laws

Boys Reformatory

•The reformatory expanded its printing plant operations and taught more boys the printing trade.

•The boys printed a weekly newspaper for all the boys to read.

•Copy of 1899 “Pioneer” newspaper in Historical Society archives

•Every 2 years, boys printed bi-annual report on the reformatory for Illinois State Officials

- -High quality books
- -Excellent photography

Boys Reformatory

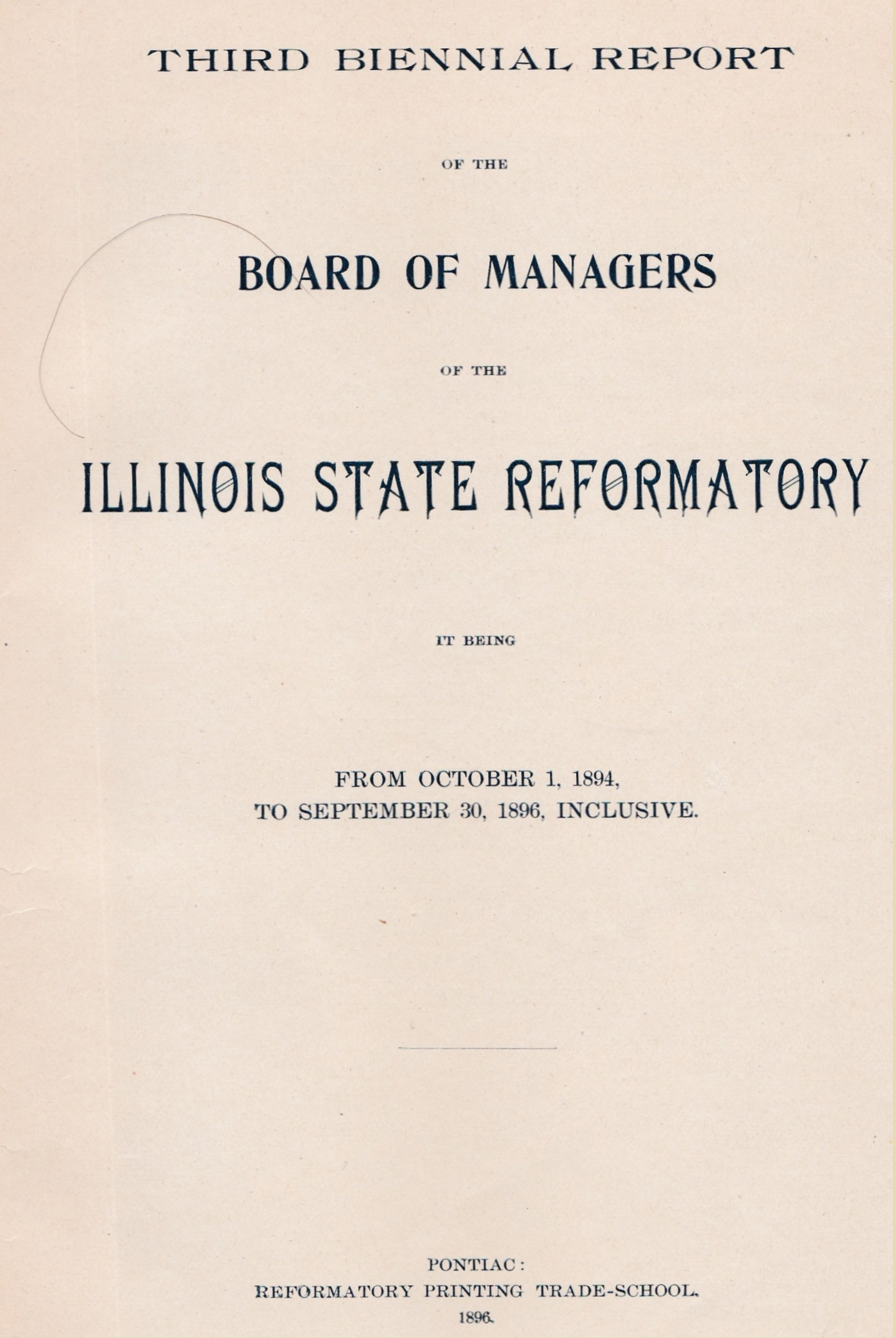
Historical Society Archives

- 1894-1896
- 1900-1902
- 1902-1904
- 1906-1908
- 1908-1910
- 1910-1912
- 1912-1914

Most of the data for this presentation from this edition.

All photos in these books have been scanned in and uploaded to Archive.Org

Boys Reformatory



THIRD BIENNIAL REPORT

OF THE

BOARD OF MANAGERS

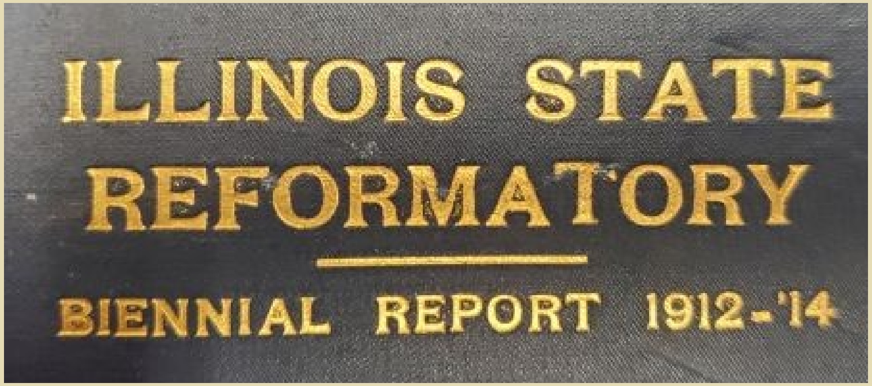
OF THE

ILLINOIS STATE REFORMATORY

IT BEING

FROM OCTOBER 1, 1894,
TO SEPTEMBER 30, 1896, INCLUSIVE.

PONTIAC:
REFORMATORY PRINTING TRADE-SCHOOL.
1896.



Boys Reformatory

- Another innovation at the reformatory was allowing the boys to set up a government and bank.

- Only boys under the age of 17 could participate.

- The reformatory management allowed the boys to pass laws, and they were enforceable.

- The boys also operated a bank to serve all of the boys.

Boys Reformatory

Boys Reformatory

- The reformatory had its own library. Eventually, the reformatory had over 12,000 books in its library.

- Some of these books were used in the classroom.

Boys Reformatory

Many country school classes toured the Reformatory

Boys Reformatory

- In 1893 the institution was changed from a boys’ reformatory into a more conventional penal institution with the acceptance of inmates as old as twenty-one.

- The name of the institution was changed to the Illinois State Reformatory.

- After 1904, many of the State's youngest juvenile offenders were no longer sent to Pontiac.
  - -They were placed in a new facility built in St. Charles, Illinois. This facility was named The Illinois School for Boys.

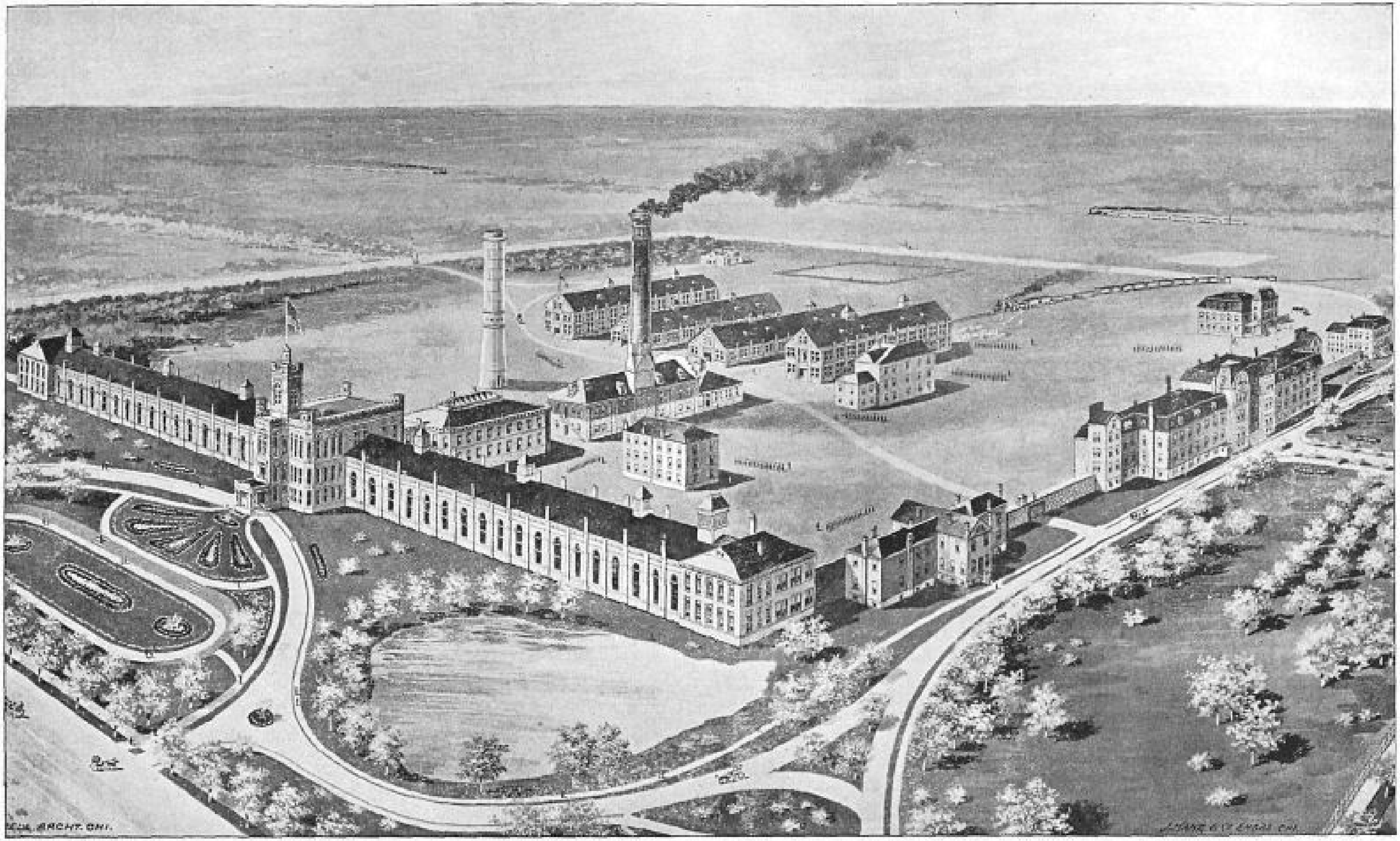
- 1933……..became an Adult Population Prison

Boys Reformatory

Thomas F. Googerty teaching blacksmithing to two students at the Boy's Reformatory.

- Googerty taught Blacksmithing at the Reformatory
- Made 5,000+ locks
- Could not retire, kept him to repair the locks !!
- Googerty Exhibit Room on 2nd Story of Strevell House

Boys Reformatory



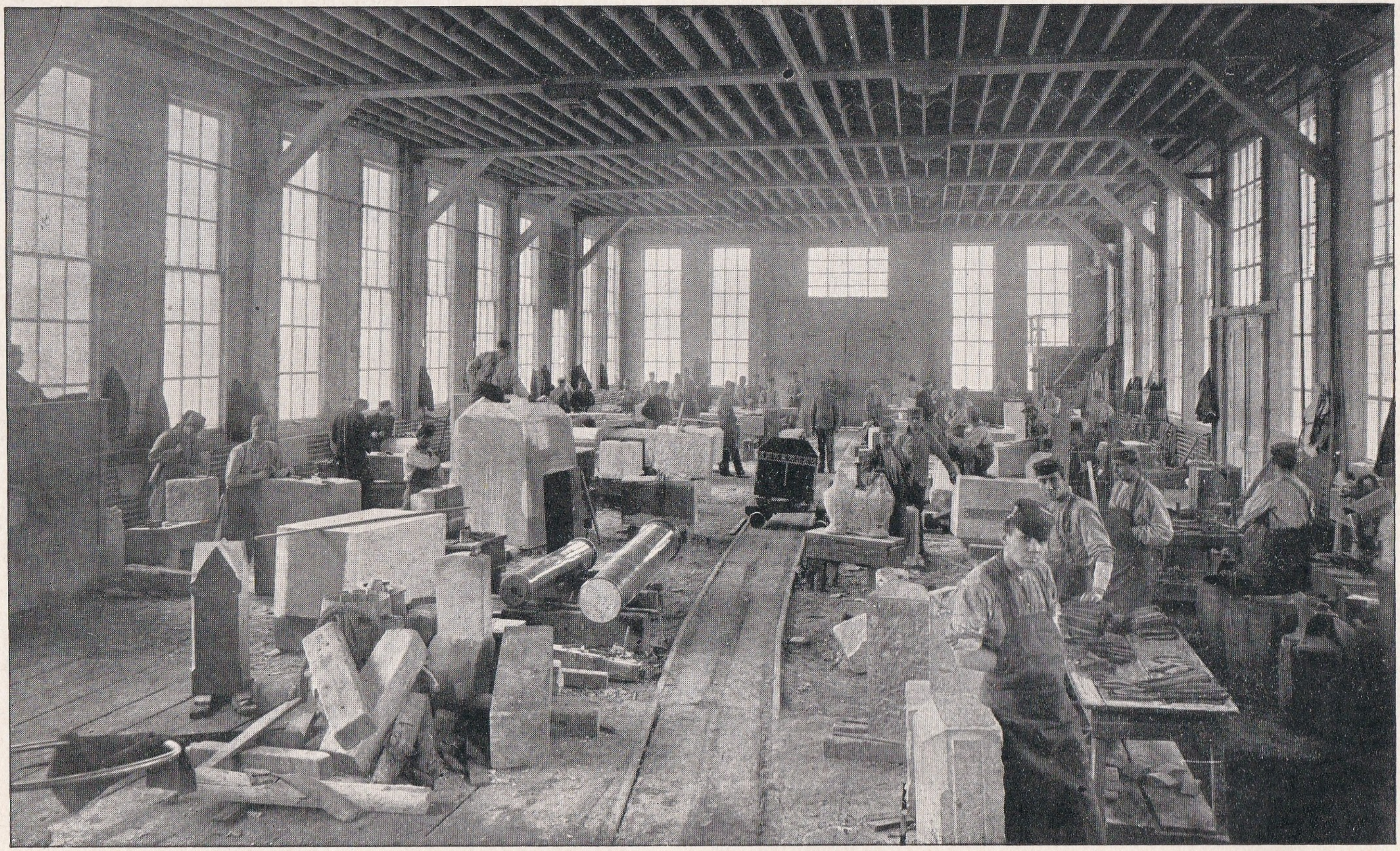
BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF ILLINOIS STATE REFORMATORY, PONTIAC.

1909 Vol. 2 Livingston County History Book

Boys Reformatory

Photos from Bi-Annual Books

Boys Reformatory



INTERIOR OF GRANITE TRADE-SCHOOL.

1894-1896 Book

Boys Reformatory

INTERIOR OF HOSIERY-SHOP.

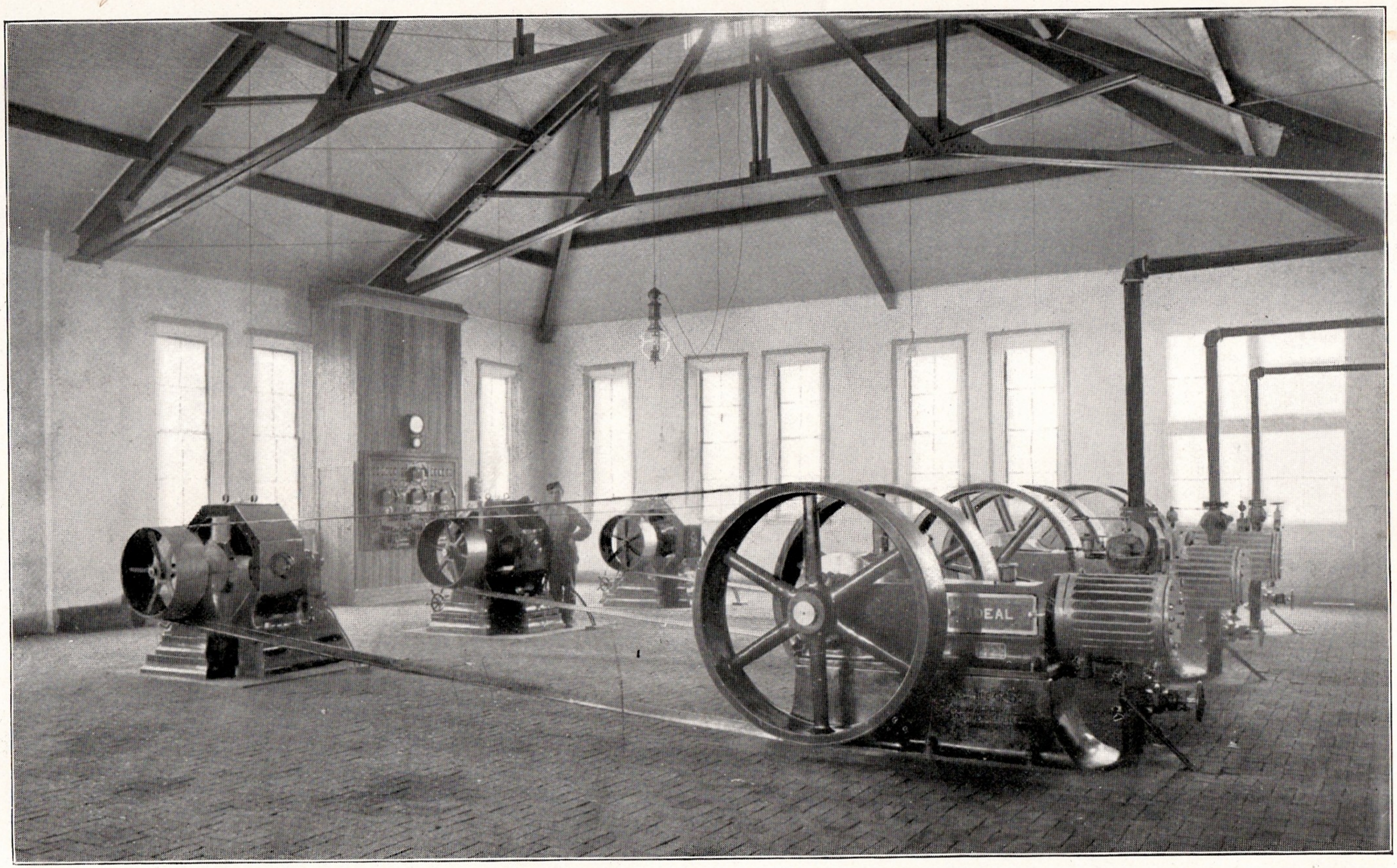
1894-1896 Book

Boys Reformatory

NEW TRADE-SCHOOL BUILDING.

1894-1896 Book

Boys Reformatory



INTERIOR OF DYNAMO-ROOM.

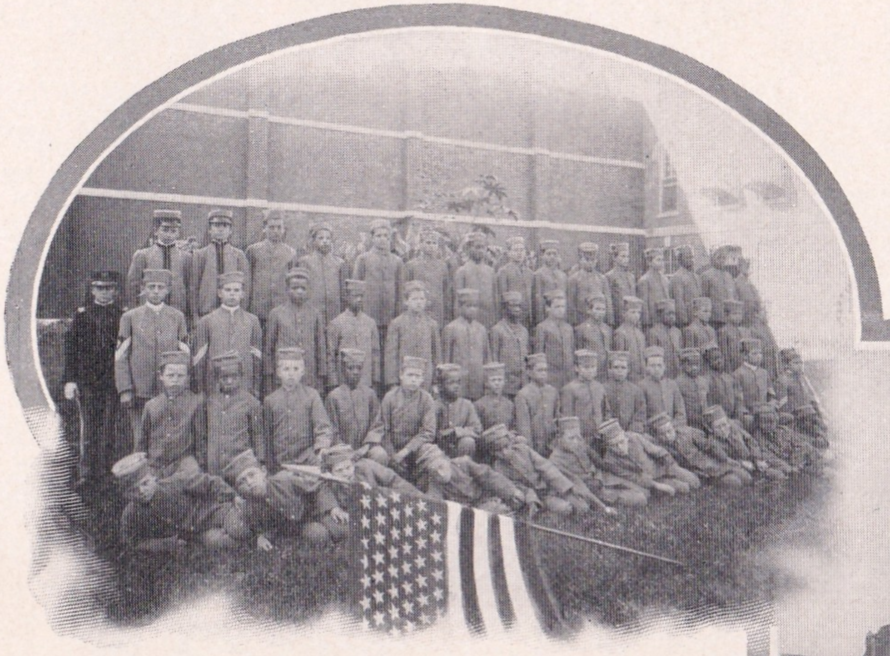
1894-1896 Book

Boys Reformatory

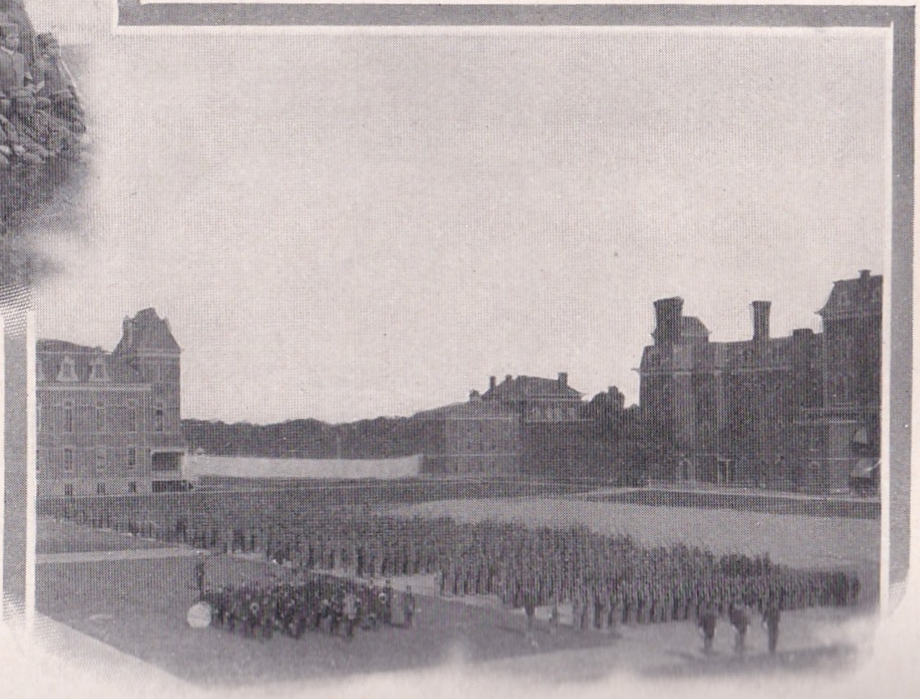
SUPERINTENDENT'S RESIDENCE AND OFFICERS' DORMITORIES.

1894-1896 Book

Boys Reformatory



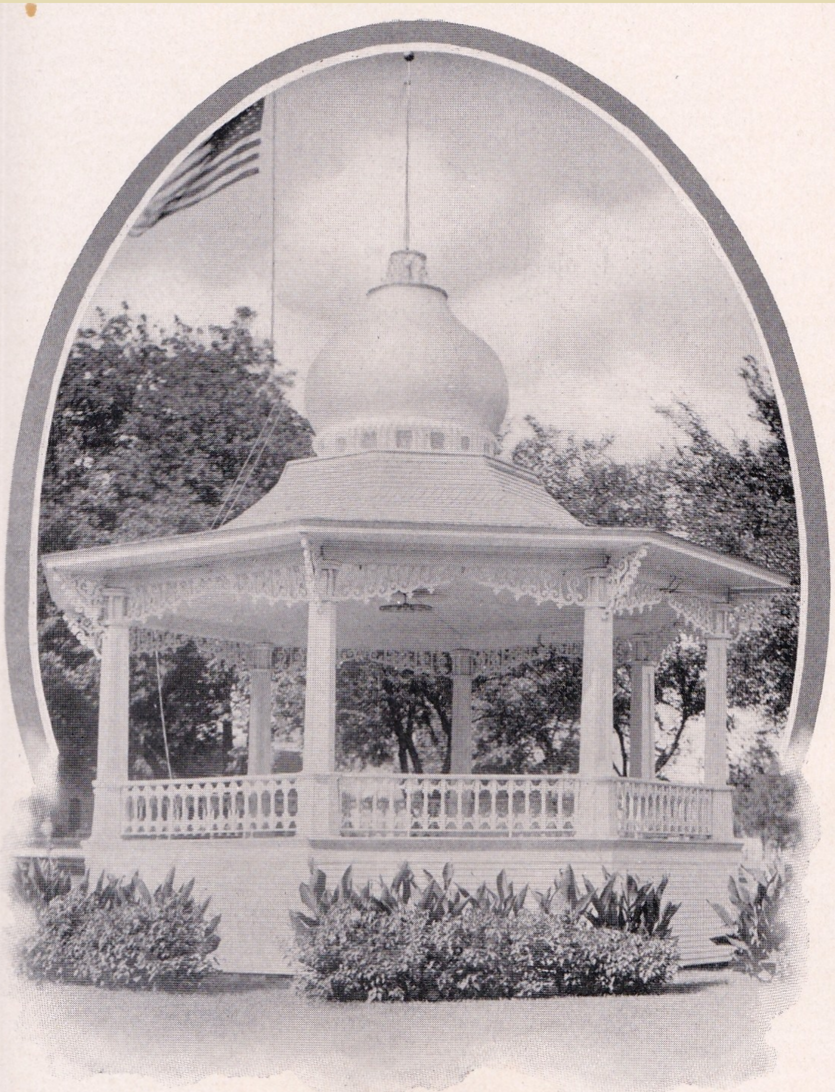
GROUP OF YOUNG SOLDIERS.



REGIMENT IN MASS.

1900-1902 Book

Boys Reformatory



BAND STAND.

1900-1902 Book

Boys Reformatory

1900-1902

TIN SHOP WITH CLASS AT WORK.

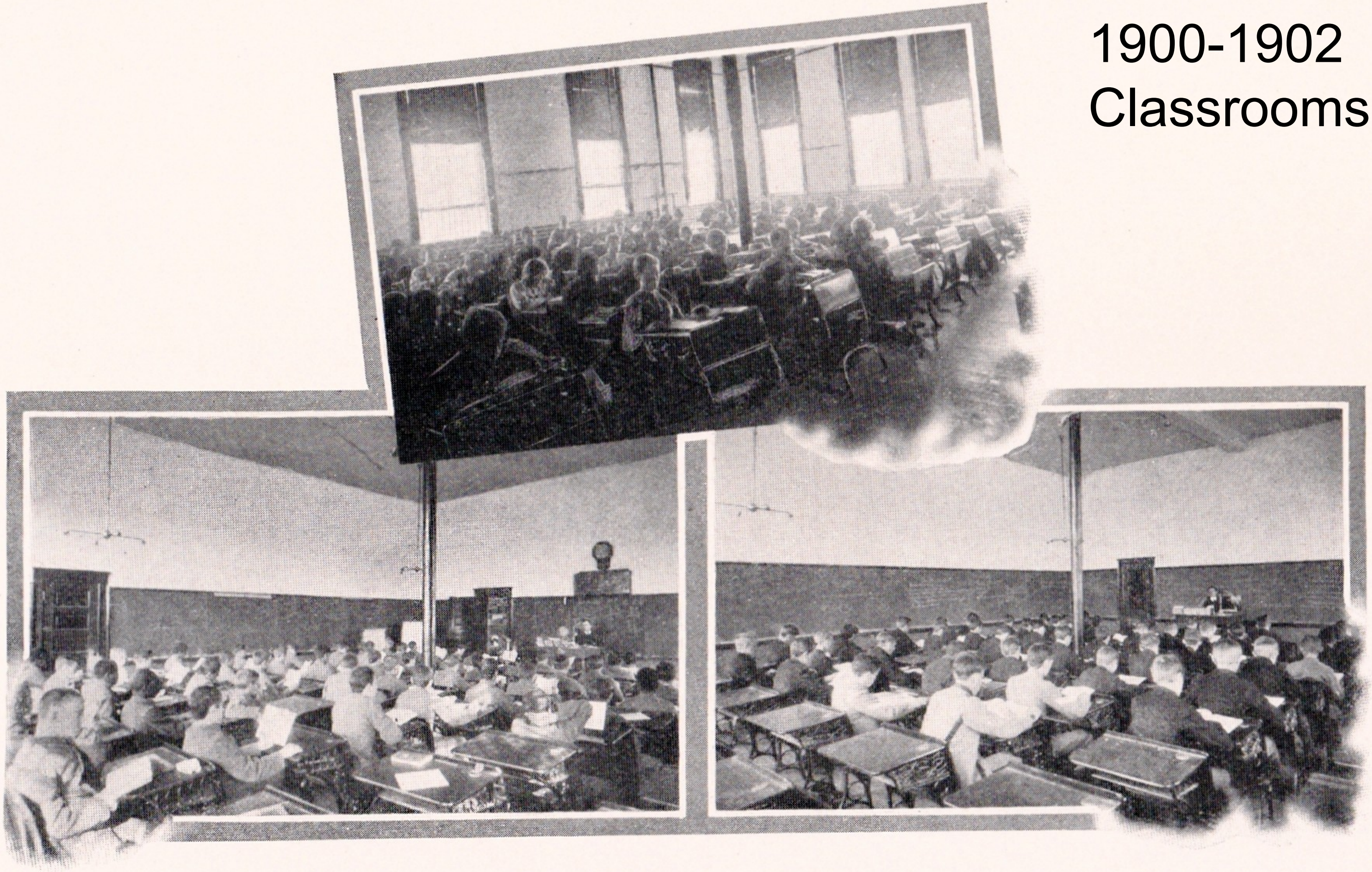
Boys Reformatory

TONSORIAL DEPARTMENT.

1900-1902, Barber shop trade

Boys Reformatory

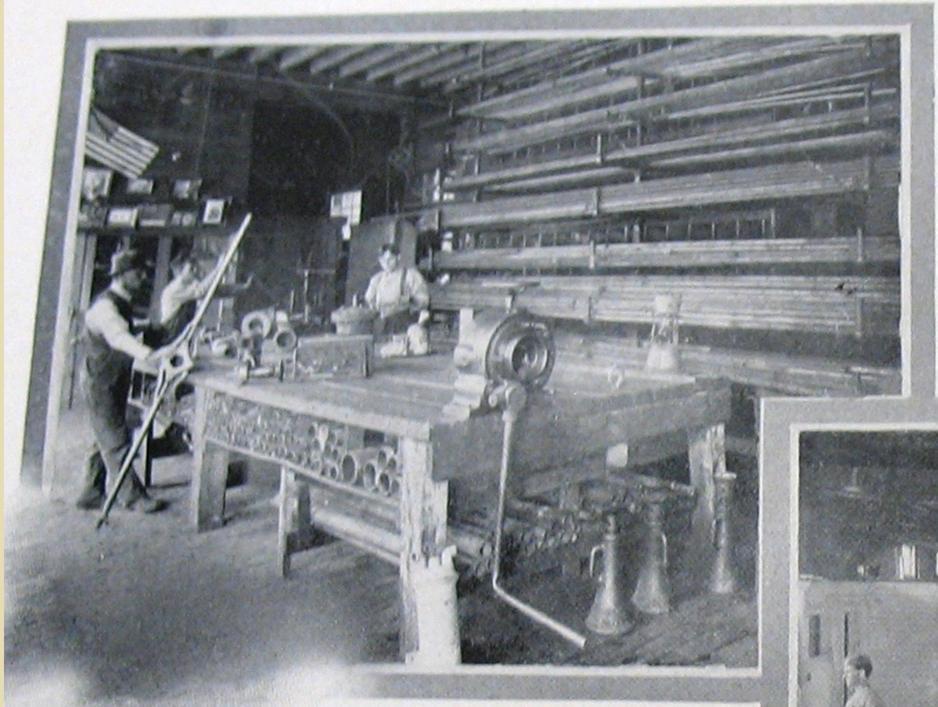
1900-1902
Classrooms



VIEWS OF SCHOOLS IN SESSION.

Boys Reformatory

1900-1902 Book
Pipe Shop
Cabinet and carpentry shop

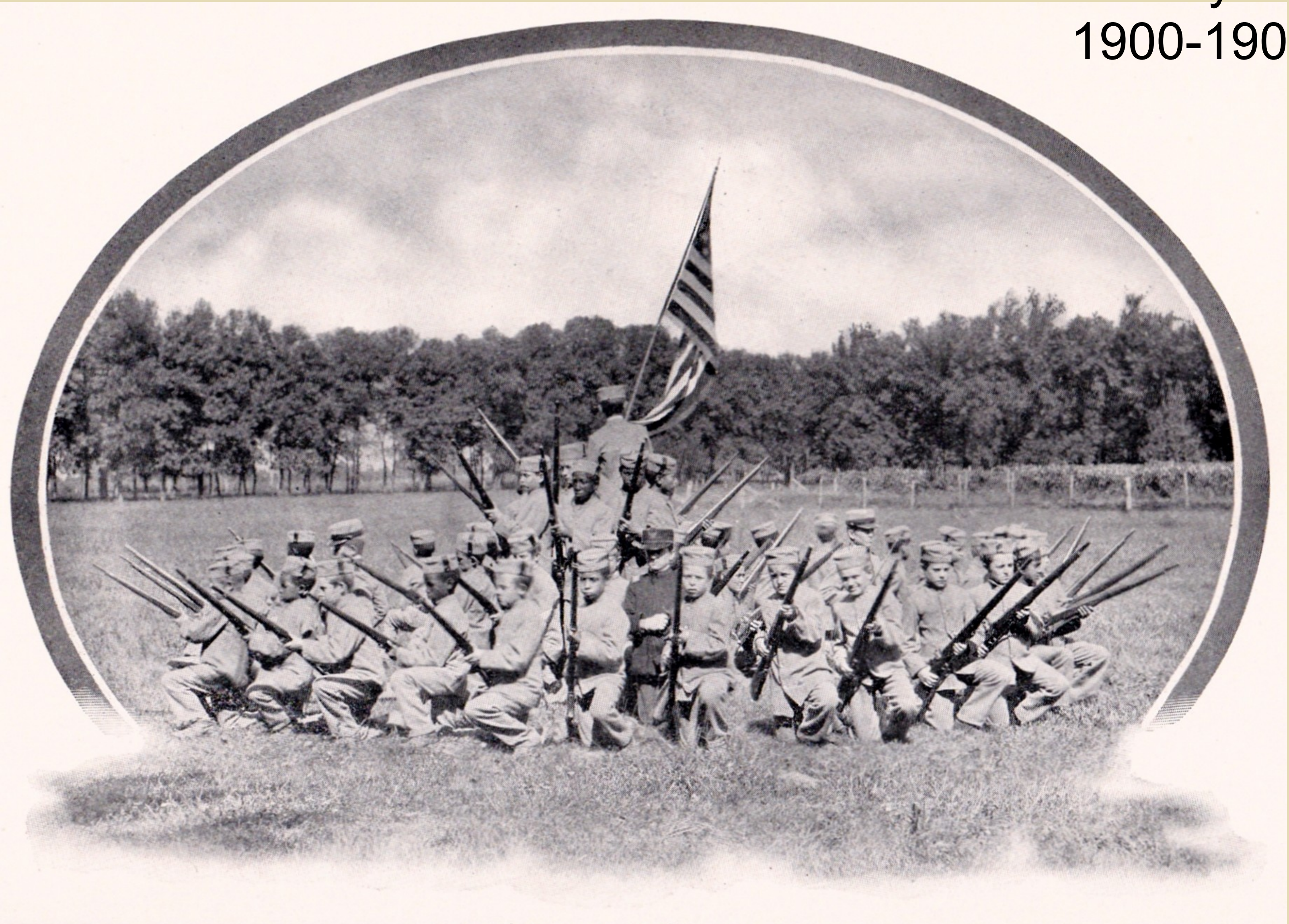


PIPE SHOP WITH CLASS IN PLUMBING.

CABINET AND CARPENTER SHOP WITH CLASS AT WORK.

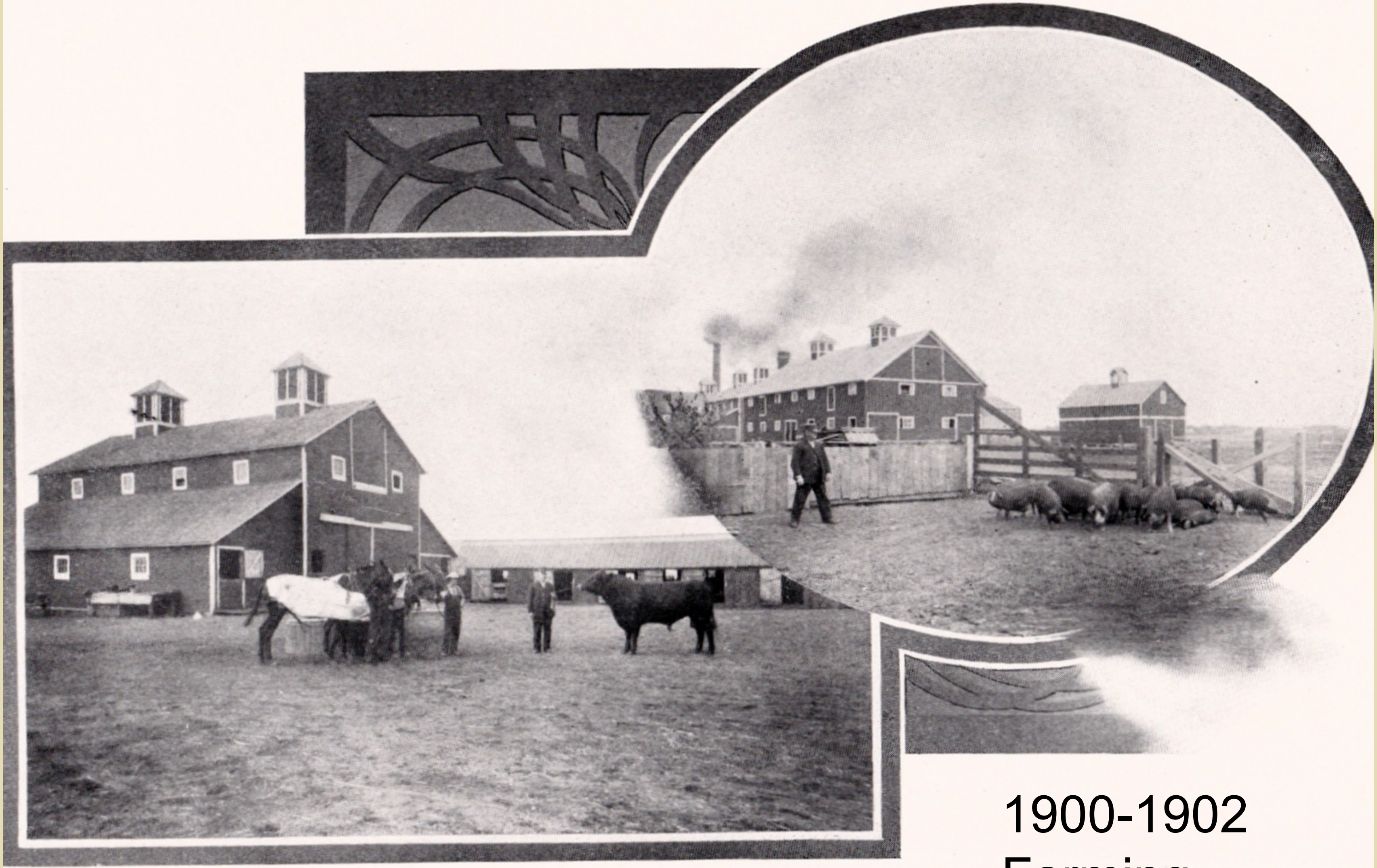
Boys Reformatory

Military Drills
1900-1902



JUVENILES AT DRILL—PYRAMID.

Boys Reformatory

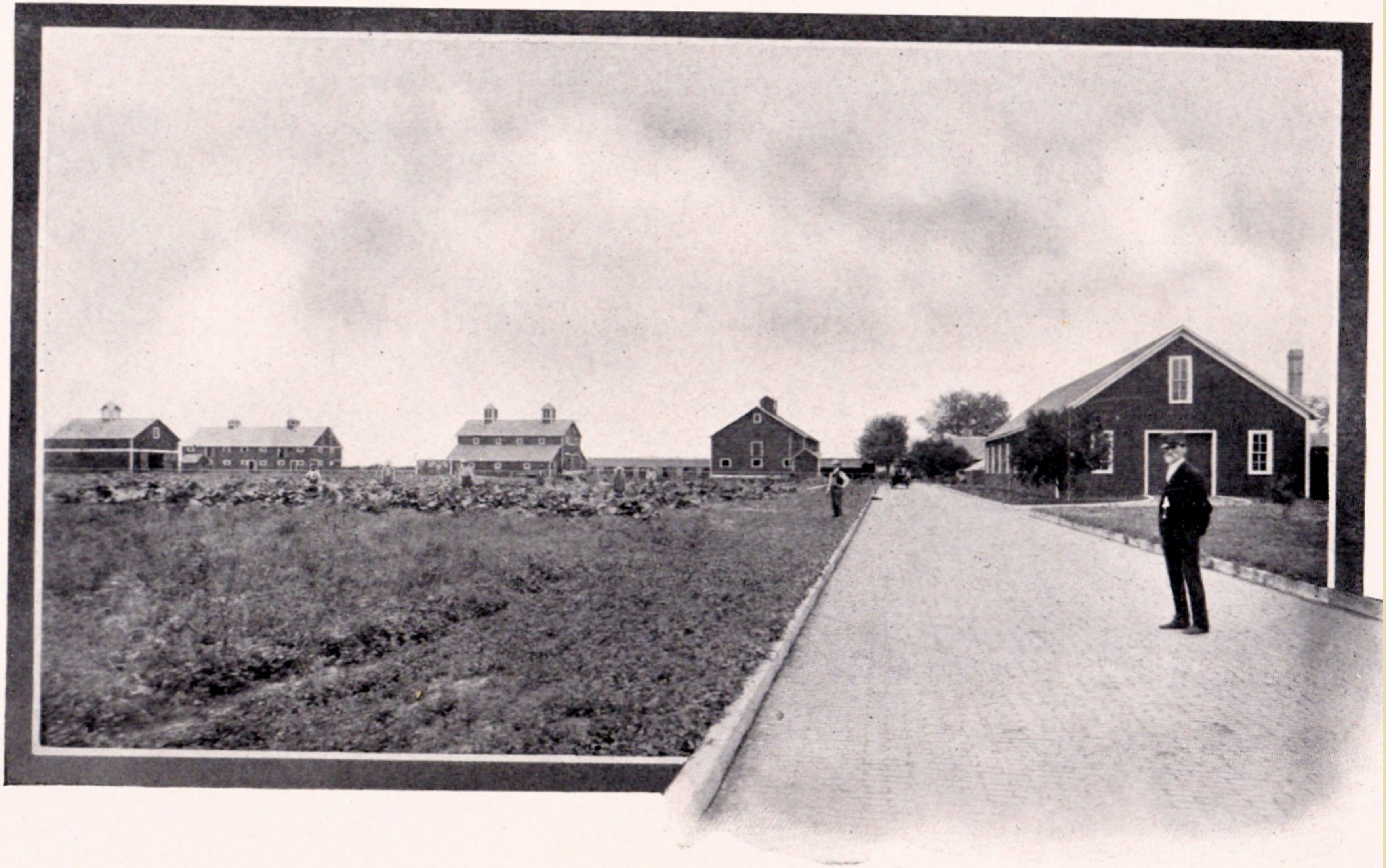


SCENES ON THE FARM.

1900-1902
Farming

Boys Reformatory

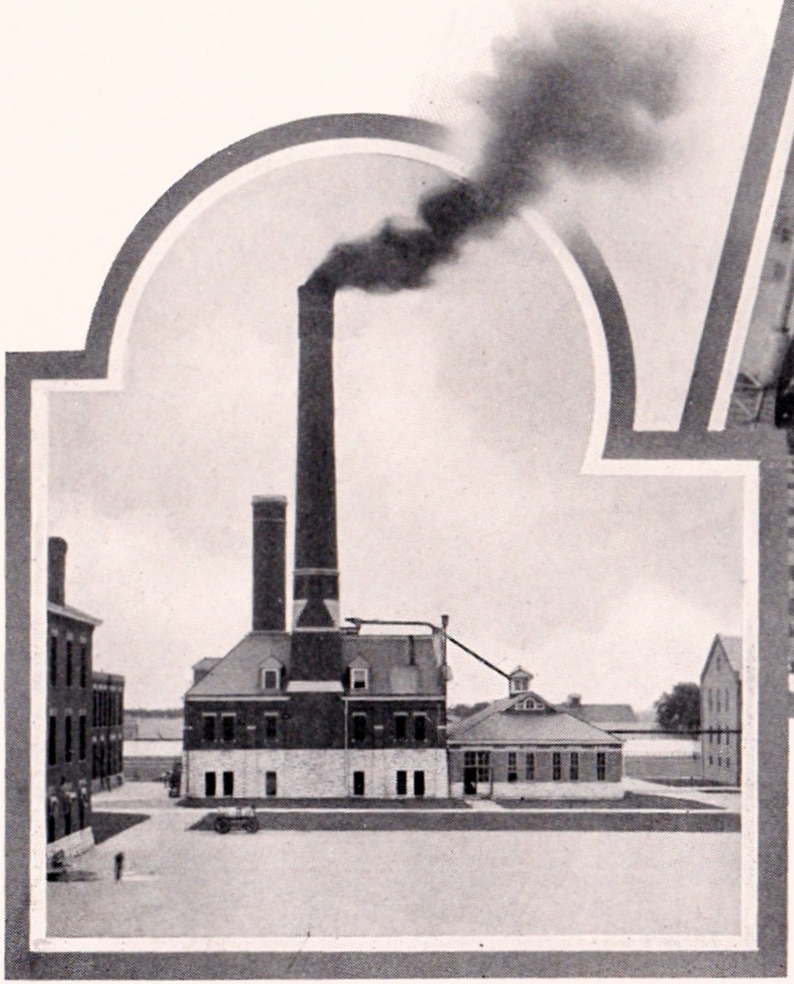
1900-1902
Farm Buildings



GROUP OF FARM BUILDINGS.

Boys Reformatory

1900-1902 Book



POWER HOUSE.

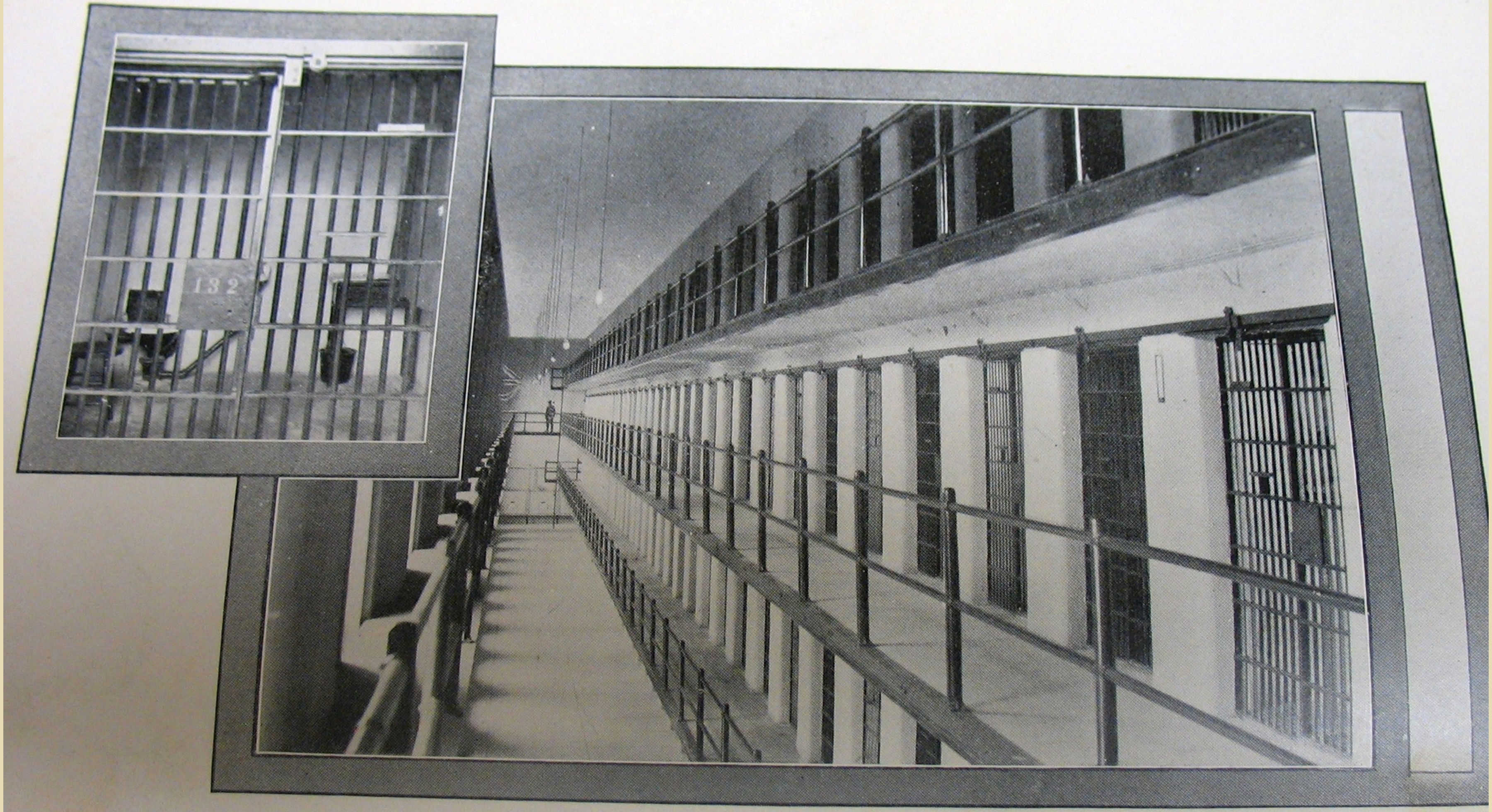
DYNAMO ROOM.

Boys Reformatory 1902-1904 Book

OFFICE OF GENERAL SUPERINTENDENT.

Boys Reformatory

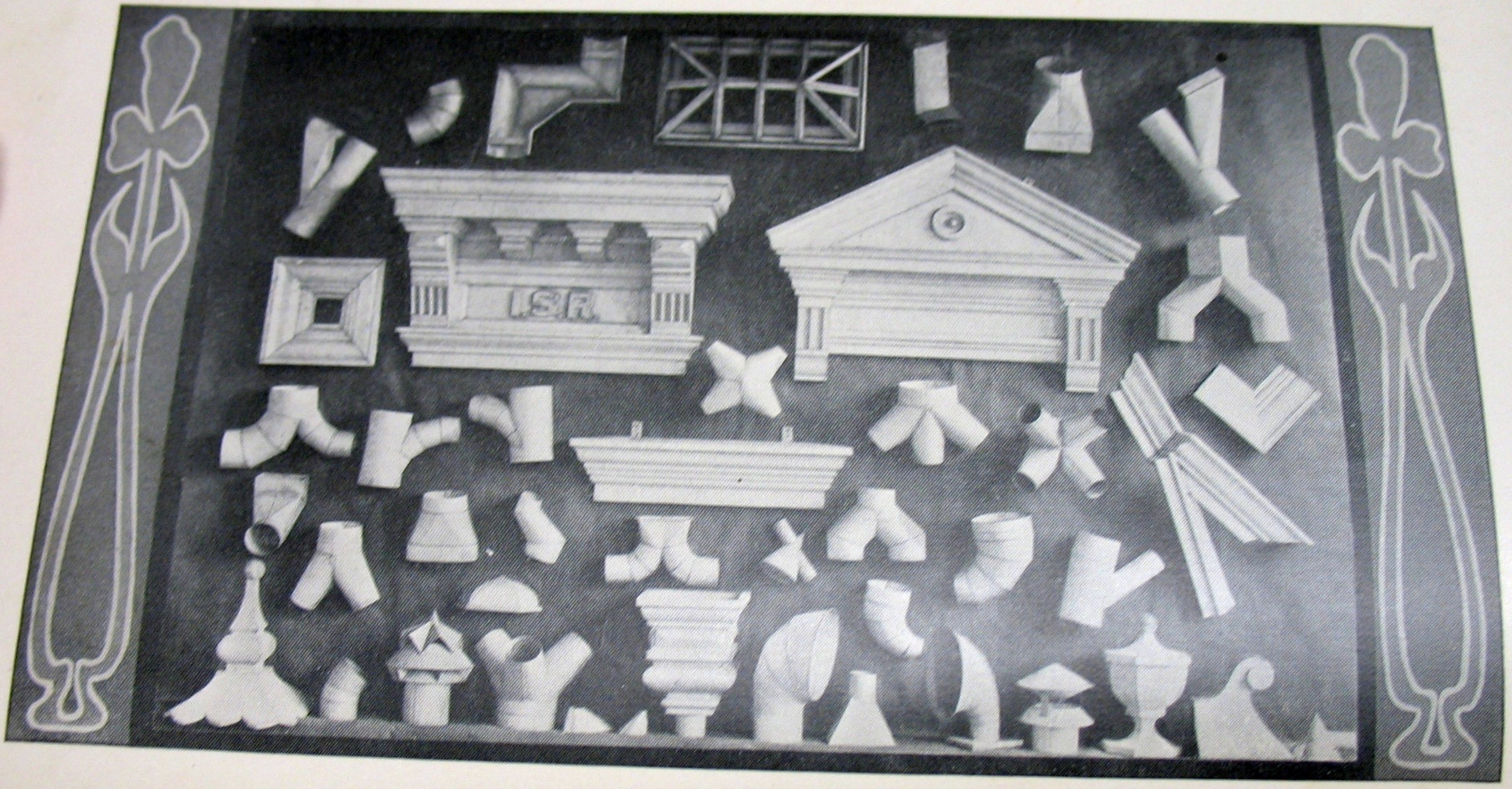
1902-1904 Book



VIEW OF GALLERIES AND INTERIOR OF CELL IN NORTH CELL HOUSE. THIS CELL HOUSE CONTAINS 296 CELLS ALL SUPPLIED WITH RUNNING WATER.

Boys Reformatory

1902-1904

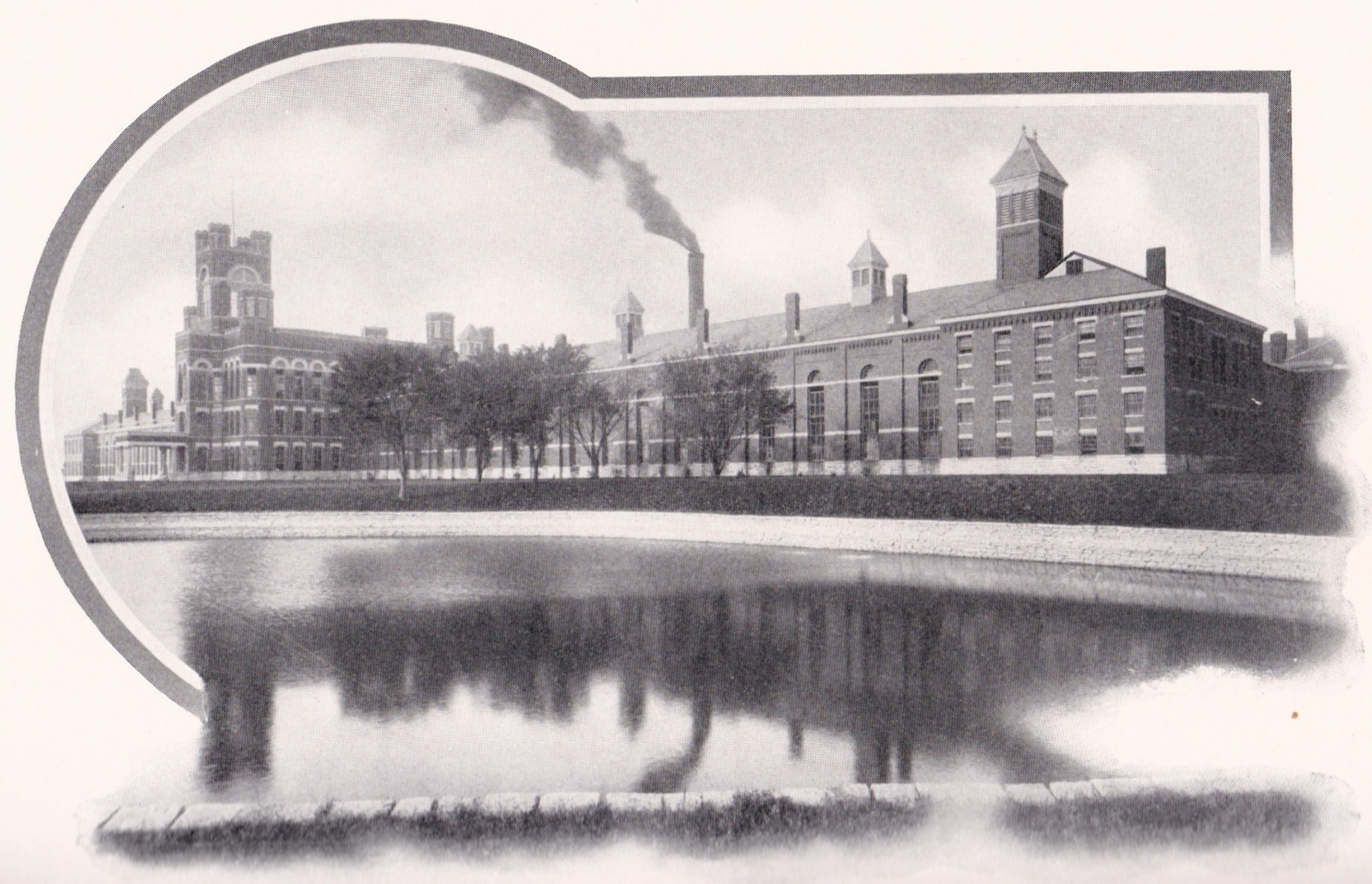


PRODUCTS OF TRADE SCHOOL—SHOWING GALVANIZED IRON WORK PLANNED AND MADE BY THE CLASS OF BOYS IN TINSMITHING.

tinwork

Boys Reformatory

1902-1904 Book



Boys Reformatory

Closing Thoughts:

•Boys Reformatory a major part of Pontiac and Livingston County's History

•80% Success rate in educating young boys and teaching them a trade where they became productive members of Society

Boys Reformatory

Questions??